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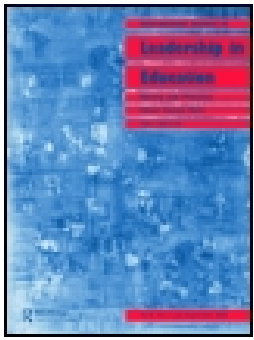
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School district support to schools: voices and perspectives of school principals in a province in South Africa*

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ABSTRACT

The role of education districts is central to the success of schools as they are mandated to work collaboratively with school principals, giving guidance and professional support. In this paper, we investigate school principals' perspectives regarding the nature of support provided by their districts to effectively conduct their work and how that support can be enhanced. Using semi-structured interviews, 18 principals from five districts were interviewed. Findings show school principals' dissatisfaction with their districts' low levels of support caused by the lack of district support on provision of resources, lack of consultation in key decisions involving their schools; district officials' lack of visibility in schools and responsiveness to change. We conclude that the success of principals and their schools partly depends on the nature of support received from their districts, and argue for improved collaboration between schools and the districts.

Introduction

Over the past decades, the interest in the role and impact of school leadership has been thriving (Masango, 2013; Mathibe, 2007; Steyn, 2002; The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Hallinger and Ko (2015) reflect on efforts to transform the role of school principals from organisational managers into leaders of learning, while Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, and Cohen's (2007) acknowledge the growing attention given to the pivotal role of school leaders in improving the quality of education. In Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin's (2013) view, a good principal is the key to a successful school, hence Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins's (2008) strong claim that school leadership is only second to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning, confirming Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006, p. 5) assertion that school leadership 'serves as a catalyst for unleashing the potential capacities that already exist in the organisation'. Huber (2006) observes that due to the ever-increasing responsibilities of school leaders for ensuring the quality of schools, school leadership has recently become one of the central concerns of educational policy-makers. As a result of this observed influence, governments are seen to be investing substantial amounts of money in advancing school principals through leadership development programmes as they believe that the investment will produce better leaders and more effective school systems (Bush, 2009). Day and Sammons (2016, p. 39) assert that principal leadership 'remains the major driving force and underpins the school's increased or sustained effectiveness and improvement'. The significance of the role of principals is also evident in the South African (SA) context. In their evaluation of a leadership development programme that had

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*In this paper education district is used interchangeably with school district. The South African policy (DBE, 2013) refers to 'education district' whereas in the literature mainly refers to 'school district'.

principals as key participants, (Bush, Kiggundu, & Moorosi, 2011) note the increasing recognition that effective leadership and management must have if schools are to be successful in providing good learning opportunities for students. Steyn (2002) asserts that school-based leadership and management in SA stopped being an option when the new policy framework for de-centralised decision-making, which is embedded in the South African Schools Act (1996), was put in place. This meant that school principals' role could no longer be left to chance – a commitment further emphasised in the South African Standards for School Principals document (2016). Since democracy, the role of principals has continuously evolved with the goal of improving school functioning and learner outcomes.

Corresponding to the level of performance expected from school principals is the support to be provided by school districts as mandated by the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) policy on school districts. The DBE (2013, p. 11) policy clearly states that the task of district offices is to work collaboratively with principals, and to 'give management and professional support'. As stated in the policy, education districts are to collaborate and support principals and schools in order to achieve their goal of ensuring that all learners have access to education of progressively high quality (DBE, 2013). However, some existing evidence suggests that in terms of support to schools, education district offices have been found wanting. A study conducted by (Bantwini, 2015), indicates that natural science teachers complained about the inadequate support received from their district officials affecting effective implementation of the curriculum policy. Accordingly, teachers conceived of this limited support as a major obstacle towards their development and new reform implementation, which also obstructed their relationships and collaboration processes. (Bantwini, 2015) therefore recommends effective collaboration, which, he argues, might create a shift from traditional top-down command-and-control relationship between districts and schools currently in existence to relationships in which district officials can effectively work with and support schools (Bantwini, 2015). The Department of Basic Education's mandate is also echoed by the OECD (2015) as it indicates that measures to help improve low-performing disadvantaged schools include strengthening and supporting school leadership, stimulating and supporting school climate and learning environments, strengthening the quality of teachers, ensuring effective classroom learning strategies and linking schools with parents and the community. This clearly shows that school districts play a pivotal role in supporting school principals and the school improvement, yet they are largely neglected by research.

In this paper, we focus on selected districts to examine the extent to which school districts are deemed supportive by the school principals. Our key research question guiding this analysis is: what are the principals' perceptions about the support provided by the district? Subsequently, we attempted to draw implications for district support based on the findings and our analysis. Underscoring the district role, Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis (2010) highlight that districts cannot necessarily make weak principals succeed, but argue that some districts can create conditions in which even good principals are likely to fail. Phillips, Raham, and Renihan (2003) argue that principals are seldom properly supported in their leadership role by school districts which have previously expected them to do little more than follow orders, oversee staff, keep the bases running and contain problems. Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis (2010) state that the vision and actions of system leaders frequently determine whether principals can be effective in leading school improvement.

Conceptual framework

This paper is premised on the notion that highly supportive districts promote school leaders' confidence in their ability to succeed and in their belief that improved school practices are important to their students' future (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Leithwood, 2010). Bergeson (2004) indicates that supportive districts set expectations, decentralise responsibility and support to schools, and serve as change agents enabling improvement in schools. Confirming the significance of district support, Waters, Robert, and Marzano (2006) established that effective districts ensure collaborative goal setting with schools towards which all stakeholders will work and allocate the necessary resources to facilitate the accomplishment of these goals, thereby creating a 'sense of urgency for the improvement of

academic improvement' (Ragland, Asera, & Johnson, 1999, p. 27). The literature (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008; The Wallace Foundation, 2013; Waters et al., 2006) identifies several aspects of leadership that are essential for districts to support schools to be successful. Rorrer et al. (2008) provide a framework for district support centred on what they regard as the essential roles that districts should play in supporting schools. Amongst these roles, is the provision of instructional leadership, which is particularly relevant to district support for schools as mandated by the DBE (2013) policy.

System-wide instructional leadership

Bush (2009) defines instructional leadership as the management of curriculum and instruction by school principals. Kaparou and Bush (2016, p. 899) further assert that instructional leadership 'involves several leadership activities that create an effective principal-teacher interaction with the intention to improve the quality of teaching and learning'. This is further supported by Day, Gu, and Sammons (2016, p. 251) who conclude that principals' instructional leadership (together with transformational) is 'necessary for success' and an essential 'contributor to improved teaching (Honig, 2012, p. 736). These studies reinforce the necessity of instructional leadership for improved student learning and for schools to turn themselves around. Clearly, as a model of leadership, instructional leadership is often associated with school-based leadership (rather than district leadership) and particularly with school principals due to their proximity to teachers and to teaching and learning. However, as used in the context of districts, we align ourselves with research that suggests a district-wide instructional leadership rather than just school-based (Augustine, Gonzalez, Ikemoto, Russell, & Zellman, 2009; Belden Russonello & Stewart, 2005; Rorrer et al., 2008). Augustine et al. (2009) found that professional development provided by district helped school principals implement a job-embedded instructional leadership support, while Belden Russonello and Stewart (2005) established that instructional decisions taken at district-level (rather than at school-level) help provide more support for schools and teachers. We also draw from Cuban's (1984, p. 129) much earlier view that district offices play a critical role 'creating pre-conditions for local school improvement'. Rorrer et al. (2008, p. 315) acknowledge the 'lack of agreement on exactly what constitutes instructional leadership at district level' but, it is noted however, that regardless of the level at which it happens, instructional leadership is essentially about 'keeping teaching and learning at the forefront of decision-making' (Leithwood et al., 2008, p. 4).

As used in this paper, instructional leadership spans across different levels of the education system, including the district and schools – what Augustine et al. (2009) call *cohesive leadership systems* or systems thinking (Senge, 2006). It is this systemic approach to instructional support that feeds into the consideration of aspects of systems theory in framing a theoretical analysis for this paper. By definition systems thinking gives primacy to the synergy and the inter-relatedness of elements within a system (Senge, 2006). Although the focus of this article is primarily on education district support as a unit of analysis, it is the potential instrumentality of the district role in systemic reform that is important for our analysis. Consequently, we align with Rorrer et al.'s (2008, p. 309) view of school districts as important agents of change, hence potential 'institutional actors' in systemic reform. This view recognises school districts' 'potential to enable and enhance reform efforts' from central and provincial governments within the district itself and in schools. Naicker and Mestry (2015) observe that as a local structure of government, the district office holds authority over multiple schools in its jurisdiction and has an oversight of the local context, placing it in a strategic position to manage reform initiatives and oversee instructional programmes. Indeed, this centrality of education districts to instructional delivery is echoed in the DBE policy (2013, p. 15) where 'school visits' and 'classroom observation' by district officials are emphasised as examples and part of the instructional support to be provided to schools. Cuban (1984, p. 146) asserts that this level of district visibility in schools is 'beyond the symbolic tour', and no system-wide improvement can be achieved without the school district's involvement in instructional programmes.

In their justification of instructional leadership, Rorrer et al. (2008) identified the 'generation of will' and 'capacity building' as two essential aspects of instructional leadership at district level. These two elements, 'help districts bridge organisational development and policy implementation' (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 315), and unless districts have generated sufficient will and have built in the capacity to act, the implementation of policies at school level is not likely to succeed (McLaughlin, 1987). Chinsamy (2002, p. 3) identified districts as essential in helping schools translate policy into practice and vital in balancing the pressure on and support of schools. Senge (2006) identified capacity building as the single most important goal in modern organisations, arguing that capacity improves organisations' ability to respond to change and reform more effectively. As shown in previous studies show that one of the ways in which districts provide instructional leadership is by creating the vision and goals to support instruction and by building capacity through professional development, communication, planning and collaboration that provides support for instruction at school level (Augustine et al., 2009; Honig, 2012; Rorrer et al., 2008). This support for instruction can be ensured through securing resources (Rorrer et al., 2008; Waters et al., 2006) and eliminating distractions that might divert the school principals' attention from learners and teachers (Ragland et al., 1999). By providing this kind of support, districts would be ensuring high-quality leadership that makes a significant difference towards school improvement and learning outcomes (Leithwood, 2010). McLaughlin (1987) contended that schools need to be supported towards the improvement of teaching and learning because commitment or the will for them to act, does not just automatically arise.

Building capacity is associated with the extent to which schools have and are able to use the knowledge, skills, personnel and other resources necessary to carry out the essential tasks (Rorrer et al., 2008). In Retna's view (2015), the school leaders' role is becoming more complex with the changing demands of the society and environment in which schools are managed. This complexity calls for the more intense and robust development of school leaders so that they can be responsive to the challenges and demands of recent reform initiatives. As Honig (2012) suggests, sustained and coordinated job-integrated level of professional development may be essential in helping principals build capacity for instructional leadership as this does not always form part of leadership preparation. Naicker and Mestry (2015) argue that in South Africa, school leadership development programmes have focused mostly on the training of individual leaders, rather than capacity building of the collective. The latter would include a collective development of both school principals and district officials so that a synergistic and system-wide approach to instructional support and collaboration can be developed.

Research methodology

Research context

The reported qualitative research study was conducted in five school districts in the Eastern Cape (EC) Province in South Africa. The EC Province is the second largest province and one of the poorest with a struggling education system. Since democracy, the province has been ranked last among the other provinces in terms of the education outcomes, with the 2015 results of the National Senior Certificate at 56.8% compared to 84.7% of the top performing province (DBE, 2015). Also, results from the South Africa Annual National Assessment administered by the Department of Basic Education indicate that the EC has been ranked last out of all the provinces (DBE, 2014).

Participants and sampling

The study was conducted with 18 school principals of both primary and secondary schools. Four schools (two primary schools and two secondary schools), from each district, were selected based on geographical access and willingness to participate in the study, making this a convenience sample. However, care was taken to include both primary and secondary schools and the key participant from each school was a school principal. From the 18 principals, nine principals were from the primary

schools and the other nine, from secondary schools. All the principals were racially black and, eight were females and 10 were males. We deliberately sought, an equal representation from primary and secondary schools in order to learn about their differences or consensus regarding the issues to be investigated.

Data collection and analysis

The purpose of the interviews was to ascertain the principals' perceptions about the support provided by the district, the factors that principals perceived as facilitating or hindering effective support from the district, as well as ways in which their support can be enhanced. All the interviews were audio recorded with the participant's permission and later transcribed verbatim. This later initialed descriptive codes (for analysis) that aimed at identifying, linking and labelling the principal's interviews, in order to determine themes and patterns. The process of coding included three stages as prescribed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and O'Donoghue (2007, pp. 91–98) which are open, axial and selective coding. Open coding refers to the process of generating initial concepts from data, axial coding to the development and linking of concepts into conceptual families and selective coding to the formalising of these relationships into theoretical frameworks. The codes were then divided into broader categories that were visible in the data. The categories that were established to be distinctive were grouped into themes (Creswell, 2009; Saldana, 2009). These themes are used as subtitles to group the findings in the section below.

Ethical considerations

Permission to undertake this research was obtained from both the EC Province Department of Education and participants. The researcher ensured that the ethical responsibilities associated with dignity, rights, safety and well-being of the participants were considered. Issues concerning voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, non-maleficence and the benefit of the research to the participants were discussed in detail with the participants before participation so as to allow them the opportunity to grant informed consent. Participants were clearly made aware of their right to withdraw from this study at any time, without explanation or prejudice. To ensure credibility, an open disclosure about the researcher's background allowed a degree of openness and trust which ensured honesty from the participants. Our use of thick data description is a further attempt to convey the actual experiences that the participants shared, without much distortion from our interpretation. In our view, this enables the reader to assess the extent to which the findings reflect the actual situations (Shenton, 2004).

Findings

Principals' perceptions regarding the support provided by their districts

In this section, we present and discuss emerging findings from the interviews. We use themes emerging from the findings as headings to organise the findings. Findings indicate that 16 of the 18 principals (89%) were dissatisfied with the kind of support provided by their districts. Several reasons were attributed to the dissatisfaction and these included: support regarding resource provision and opportunities for professional development, visibility of district officials in schools; district responsiveness; ability to change and involvement in decision-making. These themes are used as sub-headings below constituting the main perceptions regarding the nature of support provided by the districts to the schools.

Support regarding the provision of resources

Expressing their dissatisfaction in this regard, principals' concerns were mostly attributed to the provision of human resources, which affect their delivery of instruction on a daily basis. This concern was mainly regarding the limited supply of teachers of which one principal had this to say:

... the district is not supporting us at all. Take for example in my school, there is one teacher for grade 1 & 2 ..., while, grade 4–6 are taught by two teachers. I know that sometimes our schools have few learners but that does not mean, ah, the levels of these learners are different so we need our district to ensure that schools are not suffering. Now our teachers are forced to teach subjects that they never trained for.

The issue raised from the above quote suggests that there is a short supply of teachers, which was a common concern among the principals as indicating the lack of support from districts. This issue was noted to have some implications on the quality of basic education provided to the learners, where it results in the use of multi-grade teaching for primary schools that are not meant for multi-grade teaching and multi-subject teaching, leading some teachers to teach subjects which they are not qualified to teach. The issue of limited teacher supply, is further backed up by the statements that reflect its impact on the principals' role, as shown below:

... As principals, we are just principals by the title but there is not even time to do what is expected of us in the office because you have too many classes. For example, I am teaching six classes and I don't have any choice but compelled to do so because there are few teachers.

Evidently, teacher supply is a critical issue that influences the principals' ability to do their own work, but more significantly, it affects the quality of teaching and learning. While school principals are not exempt from teaching, it is obvious that many school principals view the limited supply of teaching staff as an issue that affects their daily operation.

Linked to the limited supply of teachers, was what principals viewed as systemic and structural problems which also affected the operation of the schools. Explaining this challenge, one principal said:

There are no systems in place, the support is not there ... The very school that you have visited today does not even have a School Governing Body (SGB) due to a number of problems.

Another principal said:

... I got into this position in January 2015. I struggled because it was not easy, because nobody orientated me into the position ... I was always complaining why are we not taken to a place where we are inducted ... induction was done eight months later towards the end of the year ...

Besides the limited supply of teachers, the systemic problems are also related to the absence of governing bodies and the vacant positions of senior district personnel. However, despite the districts' lack of systems to support the principals, the quotes above also indicate some sluggishness where attempts were being made to provide the necessary support. This suggests the endemic nature of problems within the system as one of the principals says:

... If I can say, talk about the district manager as a person and the staff that he works with, the district manager has a vision and he is clear about what he wants. He motivates us and even now we were called in a district meeting all the principals, motivating us as we are starting the year. But, the staff he works with, ah they don't meet him halfway, they don't have that passion, and they fail us, his staff fails us ...

It would appear that some district officials have visions on how to support principals, but are 'failed' by the wider systemic support from within the district offices. This could possibly be attributed to the culture of apathy within the district offices that are not geared towards supporting curriculum delivery and the work of principals in schools, as this extract also shows:

We had our district manager who had been here for a quiet a long time. Apparently he became ill and then it seems as if now he will not come back again due to the serious illness that he has. Presently we were given to a district manager who is acting. He is trying his level best but he came across a setup that is full of flaws.

These extracts show the complexity of issues causing dissatisfaction among school principals: lack of personnel both within district offices and schools and systemic apathy and 'malfunction' directly affecting the way schools operate. The shortage of personnel in the district offices gives some district

managers responsibility over too many circuits and too many schools, leaving them no time to visit all the schools, thereby contributing to the lack of visibility of district officials in schools.

Districts' visibility and responsiveness to change

Further aggravating the district's ability to support principals was the lack of officials' visibility in schools, and district officials' inability to respond to issues and deal with change. One of the identified weaknesses in the districts was that some of the district leaders were not well versed in dealing with changes. Their lack of knowledge in dealing with education reforms was considered as creating a barrier, suggesting the need for district officials to be developed and empowered. Explaining, one principal gave the following example:

Some of them (referring to district officials) will come into our schools, then you will just have to do a crash course on what they have come here to do because they don't read. District managers and those officials should be encouraged to acquaint themselves with all the curriculum reforms, with all the reforms that the department has.

Many principals noted the support of district officials as key in their work. The shortage of district personnel affected the speed or lack of response when schools needed help. Consequently, many of the principals noted that they have lost confidence in the district and its officials as they viewed them unhelpful. When asked why the district officials seldom visited schools, one principal said:

... With the district being middlemen, who has little or inadequate information then it becomes very difficult for them to come and work with us as principals.

Though not all principals were explicit about the district officials' lack of knowledge and inability to deal with changes as a hindrance in supporting them, their utterances revealed the lack of trust towards the district officials as shown below:

How I so wish that if the national office makes changes, at least that district managers they don't go alone to those meetings where they are given marching orders, particularly at the beginning of the year to say this is how we want our education system to operate. At least there should be principals that are involved there so that we all capture it and then when we are coming from that meeting a meeting is called specifically for reforms in education.

From the above quote, it is clear that some principals doubted some district officials' ability to cascade information from the national department to them as principals. This cast some doubt on the quality and capability of some district officials and the role of districts as intermediaries between schools and government.

Perhaps even more fundamental to the function of districts and their ability to respond to issues, is their role as intermediaries between government and schools and the power inherent in that role. Districts were viewed as 'mere middlemen' with no vehement authority on many things as the following extract shows:

... Let us take the issue of transfer of the learners. An educator comes to your office and asks for a transfer and you sign a letter but before the district can actually respond they have to first get a mandate from the province. Districts as middlemen between us and the province, they don't have powers, most powers ... are centralized in the provincial office. The challenge of the appointment of educators, educators are appointed at the level of the province but the people who know that we have a shortage of teachers are those in the district.

This reveals that power is centralised at the province, leaving districts as intermediaries with no clear roles and accountabilities and perhaps most significantly, no power to make important decisions.

While the district officials' lack of knowledge of reform issues is reinforced, we found such utterances particularly concerning given that some principals actually decried the lack of visibility of officials in schools, suggesting the need for more help and support as shown below:

Visibility, visibility of them as the district officials in the schools. Their visibility is very important. Their visibility has a message, even if a person has come and ends up here in the office. But it means ... there is somebody who is looking at what we are doing.

This extract is consistent with the popular message carried through from the principals' perceptions about the lack of support from district. We therefore found it rather challenging to reconcile this need for more visibility of district officials in schools on the one hand, and the lack of trust expressed earlier

towards some district officials and their capabilities on the other. This could suggest the different levels of knowledge and experience among the principals themselves, and among the district officials hence the principals' frustration at what they perceive as incompetence at district level, affecting the required delivery of the necessary support to schools. Significantly, it begs the question of more support and development of district officials themselves so that they can provide better support for schools.

Principals' involvement in decision-making

The other issue affecting principals' dissatisfaction was with regard to what they perceived as their districts' narrow view of them and their role as school principals. About 17 (94%) of the principals believed that their districts mainly viewed them as passive *instruction takers whose role is just policy implementation*. This surfaced when principals were probed about their involvement in district-wide changes. In response, some principals noted that:

When there are new changes or new developments in the district, we are called in that workshop ..., they just tell us after the decision have been made by the district, they just report to us that this is what is to happen.

Another one said:

... they come and then tell us this is what we expect, something like that. But there are never some decision we ever have to take with them, they take decisions there and then schools implement, implement, implement ...

Principals were unhappy with what they observed as a narrow view of their role. They spoke of lack of robust engagement within the district in debates and discussion about the ongoing curricula and policy reforms in the country and particularly with regard to their province and districts. Explaining the plight of their district, one principal said:

We never have meetings ... where we debate and discuss reforms in our education system. No one comes to us, we cannot debate policy, if you missed the policy as a white paper or as green paper, then yours is to implement. But it is very difficult for teachers to implement what they do not know.

The above quote touches on the issue that influences the lack of policy implementation in the schooling context, which has been among the major challenges confronting the province and South Africa in general (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Jansen, 2001). In this sense, the argument has been on the lack of involvement of teachers during policy development. Based on these principals' views, lack of involvement of all the stakeholders and engagement about policy persists in their districts, resulting in possible despondency and lack of enthusiasm in policy reforms. This finding reveals a top-down culture of decision-making and general lack of involvement of stakeholders in the provincial department. The following extracts further illustrates:

The district would impose a decision on new policies on us because they would be saying that they are also getting it from above. This affects us because you wish that you can plan for everything to happen and don't find yourself being told that change what you were doing and do it this way. That is what makes it difficult.

Concurring with the others, one principal added how they were also blindsided by their districts:

Eh ... our district does not involve us sometimes, as principals they don't tell us what is going to happen when. As a principal, you have your own weekly schedule for the school, but the district office, they would just say tomorrow come to a meeting, yet you had your own plans for the week. Even when they come to the schools, it's like they plan to surprise us as they do not alert us ahead of time, but just come as if they want to catch us in an act.

From the above quotes and other interviews, it appears that the lack of principals' involvement in key decision-making was a bigger symptom of what principals suspected maybe an endemic top-down culture within the Provincial Department of Education (PDE). The issues of districts officials' inability to act on some urgent matters due to the bureaucratic chain and power centralisation above, was viewed as contributing to the many challenges that were clouding schools, especially teacher shortages. Consequently, schools were the ones who were paying the price, something that caused displeasure among many principals.

Discussion

School district support for principals

These findings are not consistent with some of the international literature on supportive districts that were found to inspire confidence in their principals' ability to succeed (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Honig, 2012; Leithwood, 2010). They are however, consistent with some local literature that portrays school districts as bureaucratic and unsupportive to schools (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016). In Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis (2010) observation, highly supportive districts exhibit a clear vision of what constitutes a good school and have a framework in which the principal has autonomy to work with faculty on an improvement agenda with collaborative support from the district. They argue that with the [right] vision, framework and support in place, the principal can be held accountable for working with staff, to develop an improvement plan within the boundaries that the district has established, while the district provides support for professional development and human resource provision. Our findings in this regard suggest lack of critical resources for the delivery of instruction and relevant support, the absence of passion driving the vision towards successful curriculum delivery in schools. It is arguable that some district managers may have the vision, but lack the broader enthusiasm and system functionality within the district office, in order to provide the necessary support to schools. According to The Wallace Foundation (2013) the principals are unlikely to proceed with a leadership style focused on learning if the district and state are unsupportive, disinterested or are pursuing other agendas. Securing human resources is an important basic element through which the school district builds capacity for instructional leadership (Rorrer et al., 2008), yet the districts in our study were found wanting in this regard. The required nature of support seemed to vary from one principal to another, suggesting some inconsistencies in the way districts function, arguably resulting from lack of forward system-wide planning, driven by the districts. Many principals expressed the need to be developed professionally in order to survive in their role with all the demands and swift reforms that confront them on a daily basis, while others claimed to be 'surviving on our own'. What remains consistent is that the majority of the principals perceived the support they received as unsatisfactory. We believe that one way of increasing the effectiveness of principals is by providing them the necessary resources and support they need in order to maximise their impact on schools and student achievement. This, we believe can be achieved through a district-wide approach aimed to develop school principals as instructional leaders. A district-focused strategic approach to school support would harness the limited resources taking into consideration some contextual challenges that currently face individual school leaders.

The need for districts to support schools is echoed in the DBE (2013) policy on the organisation, roles and responsibilities of education districts and in the Medium-Term Strategic Framework 2014–2019 (The Presidency, 2014) as the South African Government states that principals will be supported, not only in maintaining discipline and high standards of conduct, but also in continuing to strengthen the capacity of education district offices, so that they in turn are able to oversee and support the running of individual schools. Furthermore, the mission of the PDE prioritises the provision of quality programmes in order to build the capacity of all employees including (and arguably, particularly) district officials and school principals. We find these policy commitments in line with the international trends that recognise the significance of developing the capacity of educational leadership to drive change (Bush, 2009; Retna, 2015; Rorrer et al., 2008) and the call for local collective capacity building for both principals and district officials (Naicker & Mestry, 2015). However, it seems that the government's promise has not yet been realised in this context, as our findings in this regard suggest that practice is not in tandem with local policy. We argue that effective leadership that is supportive of teaching and learning should be displayed as a system-wide approach throughout the provincial department and district offices to improve instructional delivery that ultimately enhances the quality of learning in schools.

Our findings further suggest a strong presence of a top-down culture of decision-making within the province, perhaps unsurprisingly so given the bureaucratic nature of education departments. In

our initial (albeit superficial) response to this we are inclined to concur with Rorrer et al. (2008), (citing Berman, 1986) that the ability of the district to build capacity depends on the district's own 'managerial competence' and the difficulty of the problems the district itself is facing. Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis (2010) argue that a district cannot hold school principals accountable when it does not have high-quality staff to support the schools or when the role of district staff is so poorly and narrowly defined that it is not held accountable for providing the support services schools need. This suggests the need to examine districts more directly as the likelihood of some contextual and sociocultural factors disabling change may lie within districts offices. We make this observation within the larger context of what emerges to be a systemic practice of top-down culture of decision-making and lack of support that possibly makes districts themselves powerless intermediaries. While this corresponds with previous research (Bantwini, 2015), we are cautious not to portray districts as perpetrators of a top-down culture of decision-making. We want to argue, however, that they could be victims of the top-down culture as well, wherein their role becomes cascading what has been instructed upon them. Therefore, although we are inclined to agree with our predecessors in viewing principals' active involvement in key decision-making by districts as a contribution towards capacity building for instructional support, the lack of which indicates non-commitment towards supporting local school principals. We want to argue for a collaborative process that encourages a two-way interaction, as it possess some benefits for both parties. Here, we align ourselves with what Cuban (1984) previously contended that a combination of tools including top-down and bottom-up policies to generate significant improvement within schools may be necessary, asking for both active and collaborative involvement of school principals in key decision-making.

Existing research indicates that highly supportive districts seek principals' ideas on major decisions about district policies, changes in curriculum and instructional improvements, use of professional development resources and the district's budget (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010). Our findings clearly contradict these views, suggesting that districts are likely to be deprived of rich, diverse and great ideas that may be generated if participatory consultation with stakeholders is undertaken. On the contrary, we acknowledge the contextual realities, that indicate that some school principals may require more support hence the fact that some argue for more visibility of district officials in responding to issues as and when they arise. This study, we believe, adds to the global discussion regarding the necessity of district support for principals, as this (is likely to) positively contribute towards performing their duties. International literature indicates that only few principals have the capacity to rise above school district's lack of vision and clear purpose (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010), hence our argument for the district support of principals. However, contextual experiences point to the possible deficiencies within the district itself, hence our argument for a system-wide capacity building in order to enhance support for schools. This, we believe, not only has policy implications for the studied local context, but for the global community as well.

Implications for district support

The South African policy on districts' responsibilities is very clear in that one of the fundamental roles of the school districts is to continuously give support to principals, the schools and parents (DBE, 2013). This view is aligned with the literature as it indicates that principals should be given the capacity to create and maintain democratic processes in schools and to work well with school governing bodies (Mathibe, 2007). Hull (2012) argues that principals cannot simply ride into a school on a white horse and turn around a low-performing school by themselves, hence the need for support. From this study, snippets of support exist, especially from some individual district managers, but these lack broader institutionalised and system-wide support. Therefore, we recommend that one of the ways in which district support of principals and their schools can be enhanced, involves *devolving certain powers and functions to the districts* by the PDE. Currently, the districts are viewed as powerless middlemen as they sometimes possess limited information about various issues that confront their districts and schools. Where this is the case, it then becomes difficult for such officials to provide the necessary

support to the school principals. Thus, if some powers from the PDE can be devolved to districts, such as the appointment of teachers, that process could be faster and more efficient. Although the PDE would retain their overall accountability, through monitoring and enforcement of legislation, this would arguably change the current perception of district officials as powerless middlemen, but more as change agents and useful conduits between government and schools.

Also, key in enhancing effective district support will be some *recognition of principals* as school authorities, who are knowledgeable of what works or will work best for their different school contexts. Principals are the custodians of the school's vision, missions and values (Mathibe, 2007). Thus, *inclusion of principals in key decision-making* directly involving them and their schools will be a better mechanism for enhancing collaboration between the districts and principals. (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016) maintain that non-involvement in decision-making suggests a low level of confidence bestowed on school principals by the district. Furthermore, these authors argue that such practice does not encourage principals to take ownership and pride in the new changes or plans to be implemented by their schools. Earlier, (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016) had contended that the success of the schooling system in South Africa depends mainly on effective collaboration between the districts and schools as they are operating at ground level, as well as the many other key stakeholders. We are of the view that principals are change agents and therefore require a certain level of autonomy and flexibility in order to succeed in their work. However, for those principals who are struggling to fulfil their duties, we strongly propose directed support and empowerment that will equip them in effectively performing their duties.

With regards to the kinds of support that principals would like to see from the district, principals mentioned the *visibility of district officials in their schools*. The visibility of district officials in schools as a way of support, is crucial for principals and it sends a message that somebody cares and is watching what is being done at school. However, this may be construed as a form of managerialism and we therefore caution that the proposed visibility of district officials in schools should not be used as a form micro-management but should convey a symbolic message that district officials are at the service of schools. Significantly, that district officials are there to provide the instructional support mandated by the policies. Done properly and in consultation with schools, this may dispel a perception that some district officials only show up at schools when there is a crisis. In this way, the visibility may instill some confidence and trust between schools and district officials and promote relationships and effective collaboration.

Further aspects which will be significant and beneficial for the principals, will be *ongoing engagements, workshops and meetings for principals in the district*. These engagements could be used for planning and continuous professional development where necessary to help principals grow and do well in their functions. These are platforms for learning and the trading of ideas with each other under the guidance of their experienced district officials. It is key to remember that some of these district officials were principals previously and have certain expertise that may benefit principals. Further, just like the teachers, *principals need to be provided with professional development that focuses on areas that needs attention and equips them to deal with constant change*. There is a need for development, through purpose-designed leadership preparation, leadership knowledge, skills and dispositions, which will influence school improvement. The OECD (2012) states that consensus exists among practitioners, researchers and policy-makers, that high-quality school leadership training contributes to more effective leadership, and therefore to improvement in teaching and learning.

Even though we strongly argue for the support of principals by their district, we are also of the view that principals should not solely depend on districts for support. There are certain kinds of support that principals can get from external agencies and not necessarily from their districts. For instance, there are non-profit organisations that work in the schooling sector, which can lend various kinds of support to the principals. This could be in the form of explaining some of the policies that principals find difficult to understand and provide easier implementation strategies or assistance by providing a financial course for individuals who lack a background in that area. This is by no means saying that the district is released from its official duties but we argue that principals should also be proactive in

ensuring that their schools do not suffer dismally in case their districts do not provide the expected adequate support.

Conclusion

As described by the selected principals, the nature and amount of support provided by their districts was not sufficient and left much to be desired. We conclude that it is difficult, though not impossible, to carry out the school vision if the principal does not feel supported by the district. The success of principals and their schools depends partly on the nature and extent of support that they receive from their districts. Thus, it is imperative and necessary that districts ensure that they render effective support to the principals and the schools so that they can in turn achieve their goals. They should provide guidance to the schools and principals on the best approaches and practices that would assist in the attainment of the school's vision. The principals' support from their districts can have a ripple effect as it can also be easily transferred to their teachers and parents. Also critical is that the district should possess adequate human capacity to undertake the support, which includes school visitations. This human capacity should be equipped to deal with the ongoing changes and new reforms as they are like a moving target. Furthermore, the school district support of principals should not be left to chance but should be an intentional system-wide practice. There should be school district programmes that ensure and spell out how the support should be conducted, the specific officials and timeframes.

Clearly, these findings are not that comprehensive and therefore there is a need for more research that will delve into some of the issues identified in this study. In particular, we acknowledge as a limitation, that the analysis is heavily focused on the support provided or not provided by school districts, yet only from the perspective of the school principals. We call for more research with the districts themselves – research that addresses a gap in the attention given to the role of district leadership and research that aims to unpick some of the issues and challenges within districts and help provide a way forward in the improvement of educational outcomes.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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